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Lectio of Surprises

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ABSTRACT:

This is a short piece I wrote for Saint Paul Monastery's Benedictine Center on lectio divina. It was posted on their blog in November 2019. I lead their School of Lectio Divina, a 6-day silent retreat, and wrote this piece about my own lectio practice. It included 3 pictures, which could not be uploaded in the document in this format. I'm happy to send them to you if you want this piece.

Lectio of Surprises

by Dr. Kathleen Cahalan

I've been practicing sustained *lectio divina* for a long time. Over the course of many texts, I'm continually surprised by God.

Last spring, I finished a long *lectio* with the Gospel of Luke that took me two-and-half years. It worked out that I read chapter 22 and 23 during Lent and chapter 24 during the weeks of Easter. It was magnificent but, to be honest, I was getting a bit worn down by the end. Reading Luke so closely had been intense. It had been a long journey and I was looking forward to a break over the summer. I began thinking that I would turn to the psalms, one of my favorite places to land in the scriptures for some *lectio*.

So, I set my sights on the psalms even before I came to the end of Luke. I made a psalm notebook, copying the first 50 psalms that would be on the left page, with a blank page on the right for my notes. I had a method and I was ready to begin when the Spirit prompted. And, somehow, in some way, I can't quite explain it, but God said, "Read Genesis." Genesis?! Come on – I just read Luke. I want short psalms not great big long narratives about patriarchs. Surprise! It's Genesis. I put the notebook away for another time. The Spirit of God propelled me into Genesis. Clearly God wanted me to know something here.

Often people will ask me – “How do I find a text?” First, you ask God for help and guidance. Say this prayer to God: “I want to have a long conversation with you through your holy Word. What shall I pick up and read?” And then wait. You might have inclinations, so try it out. It might work or not. (I’ll use that psalm notebook one day.) The most important thing is to trust in the Lord and wait upon God’s invitation. It might be a surprise.

Surprise #2. I know now why God allows cell phones in our lives. Because there is an app called “voice memo” and this app saved my *lectio* group.

I have met with a small group of women for at least 12 years. We have gone through several instantiations with various members, which I’ll spare you for the moment, to say that three of us (with a fourth we invited in) decided that we loved scripture and would reconstitute the group around shared *lectio*. We began to meet monthly about four years ago, with each person taking a month to share from a *lectio* from their practice. Our connections to each other and to the text grew and blossomed. But over the years it became harder to get together each month. We are all soooo busy. We adjusted to summer schedules and stopped meeting those months. We tried scheduling in advance, which took countless emails. But something would always come up and emails would take off trying to change the date. At one point we had to make a rule: if one person drops that month, the group still meets; if two people drop, the meeting is cancelled.

During Advent a few years ago, we decided to try something new. Each of us took a Sunday and offered a reflection on the gospel reading. One person typed it, but I made a “voice memo” on my phone and sent the group an audio recording. The others tried it too. We began each reflection by reading the gospel aloud.

We struggled on the next year trying to meet. We did the Advent voice memos again the following year. Finally, as the new year began, we admitted that trying to schedule meetings was not working. We were at a breaking point. It was suggested that we try the voice memo method for the weeks of Ordinary Time leading up to Lent. We’d see if we could sustain it. And then Lent came and we decided to keep at it, each of us taking one Sunday, and then the Easter season, and we kept going, and right on through the summer

and this autumn. Now a group that could not be sustained face-to-face meets every week through a voice recording. Surprise! God's Word comes alive each week through the text and each person's *lectio* (which are often better than the homilies I hear. If only preachers would do *lectio*!). God was not going to let our schedules get in the way. In fact, God seems to have wanted us to spend more time on our *lectio*. Together.

There is something about *lectio* that takes a known or familiar text and makes you cry out: "I've never heard that before!" I'm reading the book of Genesis very slowly, each line and story and chapter. When I get to chapter 6, here is Noah. And I realize – I don't *know* Noah. I mean I know about Noah and the ark but all it means to me is a lot of bad images from childhood and clichés and Christians searching for that boat on a mountain that can't be found. I didn't take it seriously. But God said, "Take this very seriously." And I heard the invitation, "Spend the next 40 days and nights with Noah on the ark." Surprise! 40 days and 40 nights is a long time to spend with Genesis 6 and 7. But I stayed. I stayed with Noah and his wife and their children and grandchildren and all the animals and seeds that they took with them. God's word, this holy text, became my ark. Noah was my guide and I know him a bit better now. Ark of safety and salvation. It was time to be flooded by a new creation.

Divine reading, holy Word, *lectio divina*. When we seek out a new text for our *lectio*, when we adapt to new ways of prayer, and when we take a path we never anticipated, God loves to surprise us by this holy reading.

